

The Readers by Iris Violetta

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Summary: Max and El find some common ground.

The Readers

Max has always loved to read. Losing herself in different worlds gives her the same rush that she has when she gets a new high score or when she feels the wind and sun on her face as she zooms along on her board. The way certain words string together and light up her mind...it's a beauty she can't quite explain. One of the first things she does after moving to Hawkins is getting a new library card and soon her backpack always contains a borrowed book or two.

She wishes it didn't, but it bothers her when El ignores her. Lucas and Dustin try to convince her that it's no big deal.

"Don't worry about El. She doesn't always understand like, social manners."

"You mean she's tactless."

"Uh, sure."

"Seriously though, Max, the first time we met her she tried to take off her clothes in front of us!" Dustin mimics the way El had started to take off her shirt and knocks his hat to the ground. Max just raises an eyebrow.

Still, Eleven seems so cool and Max can see the way the boys love her - *all* of them. The girl is a magnet.

El loses herself in books. She's reading more and more these days; she's always been a fast learner. She's quickly working through Hopper's old books. Well, Sara's books - they all have her name scrawled inside the front cover. Childish handwriting, but El's isn't much better when she adds Jane underneath.

El is allowed visitors now, but only one or two at a time. Mike is at the cabin almost every afternoon and sometimes Dustin or Lucas will accompany him. On the days he goes alone, the others send gifts with

him, old comics or candies.

It's a sunny Thursday in December when Max catches Mike on his way out of school. She thrusts a worn paperback into his hands and he scrunches his brow in confusion.

"For El. I thought she might like it. It's one of my favorites." She blurts it out in a hurry before she can chicken out but the grin on Mike's face is worth it. Maybe they *can* be friends now.

"Thanks. I'll let her know."

When he gets to the cabin, he excitedly presents the book to El. She takes it from him, considers it in her hands, before placing it on her dresser. She has no plans to open it.

Well, that is until a particularly long and rainy Saturday, one where Hopper is working all day and nothing good is on the television. After pacing past the dresser for the fifth time, she grabs the book and quickly becomes intrigued by the story of orphans who hide out in an old train car. Kids helping each other and fending for themselves - she can relate.

She finishes it that same day. The next time Mike visits, she shyly hands it to him and says, "Tell Max I really liked it."

The next week Mike stays home with a cold and Max shows up in his place. El is surprised and a little wary when she opens the door to find her instead of one of the boys. But she's polite and lets her inside.

"Hey. Um, I'm sure you know Mike is sick. I brought you another book. He told me you really liked *The Boxcar Children*."

El nods, curls flopping around. Max shuffles uncomfortably, wishing to fill the silence. Her eyes catch on a familiar book on the coffee table.

"Oh my god, I love this book."

El's eyes light up. "You like Anne?"

"Yeah, I think it's like required reading for redheads," she laughs. "She's kind of a badass, right? I would totally hit Lucas with a blackboard if he ever called me 'carrots'."

El giggles and Max grins at the sound. They spend the rest of the afternoon discussing their favorite parts. When El insists on making them Eggos, Max knows she's broken through.

Max insists on bringing her more options, because "god knows what Wheeler is giving you." And while El does like the books that Mike brings over - *The Hobbit*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, the Narnia books - she can't help but be excited about the variety. It's what she desperately craves to get through another year of hiding. After a few weeks - after *The Family Under the Bridge* and *James and the Giant Peach* and *Stuart Little* - she finds herself looking forward to seeing Max. To seeing her friend.

Max starts visiting the cabin once a week. She'll go to the library first to exchange El's books and Steve drives her so she's not tromping through the snow carrying Laura Ingalls Wilder and Oz books. He insists it has nothing to do with the new, cute assistant librarian.

When summer finally comes, Hopper grows used to seeing the two girls on the porch, noses buried in books and bare feet thrown up on the railing. He supposes it makes up for all the trouble the redhead is usually getting up to.

They still spend most of their time with the boys, but books are *their* thing, their special connection. It grows along with them over the years. The shed behind the Byers' house becomes the Boxcar, complete with broken dishware set and other treasures from the dump. They start their own Egypt Game in the woods by the cabin, which Max insists is *girls only*. (El repeats this to Mike and the sheer joy on her face is enough that he doesn't even care if he's not included.) They make up toasts like Gatsby and keep notebooks like Harriet. They argue over which museum they would run away to and debate Mr. Darcy vs Mr. Rochester (but don't even get them started on Heathcliff). They make pancakes and pretend they're eating at roadside diners across the country. They cry when Beth dies and

cheer when Boo Radley shows up. They giggle while reading Judy Blume and gasp over V.C. Andrews. They swap Agatha Christie novels and promise not to give away the endings.

Even in college - where Max majors in literature and El makes sure to take at least one English course a year - their phone conversations and letters include book recommendations: Dickens to Didion, Melville to Morrison, Shakespeare to Sontag.

And they forget that, at one point, they weren't even friends to begin with.